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CITE Extension



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February 1990 (Issue 2)

Food Safety—Some Steps for Combating the Public's Doubts

Georgia Satellite Training Draws Large Audience

The high profile of food safety issues has long confused the general consuming public. People find it difficult to sort out the facts from sensationalism, according to **Phil Tybor**, head of the University of Georgia Extension Service Food Science Department. Agents need to be prepared to help calm the public with correct, current, research-based information. Tybor's department recently used satellite technology to give agents up-to-date training in dealing with consumer attitudes and desires related to food safety and quality.

Educators Under Pressure

The educational network, including the university Extension Service, is under pressure to teach the finer details of food safety. In response, the Extension Food Quality Task Force carried out a statewide video teleconference training for county Extension agents in January, the first of its kind in Georgia.

During the teleconference, more than 250 agents gathered in 10 satellite downlink sites to listen to experts from the

Extension Service, the Centers for Disease Control, the Food and Drug Administration, and USDA speakers explain the complex issues of food safety and answer phoned-in questions from agents.

Electronic/Text Training

The training, coupled with a detailed text and resource manual, prepared agents with current, research-based material as they meet with consumers, producers, food processors, and other groups concerned with food safety and quality.

Translating Terminology

In a recent article in *Food News For Consumers*, Winter 1990 issue, **Sharon Sachs** and **Mary Ann Parmley**, staff writers, point out that consumers have a hard time sorting out messages about the food supply. For every concern, there are multiple opinions as to the truth or nontruth of the issue.

There is a great babble of information, with all kinds of groups speaking what seem to be different languages. This is at the heart of the risk communication problem as con-

When It Says

contributes to
suggests
indicates
is associated with
some scientists believe
at least in some people
animal studies show
in people with high Y
elevates blood cholesterol
high intakes elevate X

sumers try to decipher food safety/quality issues.

Rational Alertness

Consumers must be brought up to a level of "rational alertness," where they can make independent decisions about risk information, says **Peter Sandman**, director of Environmental Communication Research at Rutgers (see July-Issue 1, *CITE Extension*, "Cite-Clips"). To achieve that kind of objectivity, it's important for people to know more about how different messages originate. Scientists, government officials, the media, groups, and consumers themselves often view risks quite differently.

Editor **Kristen McNutt**, in *Consumer Magazine Digest's* Fall 1989 issue, printed a handy reference guide of words often misinterpreted by lay-readers. It may help you to clip and save

It Does Not Mean

causes
means
proves
is causally related to
all scientists agree
probably in all people
human studies would show
in people with normal Y
increases heart disease
low intakes decrease X

these "translations" to clarify meanings when producing media materials dealing with food safety/quality.

USDA Studies Risk Communication

Also designed to help consumers distinguish between perceived and actual concerns about the safety of the food supply, two USDA agencies, Food Safety and Inspection Service and the Extension Service, are working with Colorado State University researchers on a new study. **Beth Branthaver**, ES project coordinator, says, "Colorado will use focus groups to see how risk messages are understood in different formats—such as a newspaper story or video news release."

This effort will contribute to our being able to help consumers feel more confident about food choices in the future.

M

eeet CIT

Tom Tate is an information systems designer who is the interim head of CIT's Information and Educational Technology staff.

Tom grew up in Missouri, living next door most of his life to a county Extension agent. He holds degrees from the University of Missouri and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. He has worked in the information technology arena since the mid-1960's. His career started in aerospace. After 3 years of building airplanes and spacecraft, he shifted his information technology

efforts from aerospace to agriculture. Since coming to USDA, all but 5 years of his service here has been with the Cooperative Extension System.

Rhymes With "Tom"

Tom is best known for his pioneering efforts in the application of information technology, especially CD-ROM. He has also been an early leader in interactive video (IVEN), telecommunications (DIALCOM), Accountability and Evaluation (NARS), Research Results Data Base (RRDB),

and the CES systems network (CES-NET). He received the 1989 ACE Award of Excellence for outstanding achievement in interactive video.

Lifestyle Design

When not designing information systems, Tom enjoys sailing, skiing, photography (still and motion), world travel (31 nations), visiting the family farm in Missouri, and parenting **Samantha**, now a freshman at Stanford University.



P

oor Missing Out On Information Age

One of the conclusions reached in The Office of Technology Assessment's (OTA) recent report, *Critical Connections: Communication for the Future* (see February-Issue 2, **CITExtension**, "Write To Read"), is that the poor, uneducated, and rural citizenry stand to miss out

on high-tech information services.

The report claims that access problems stem from the high cost of some advanced technologies, the possibility of cutbacks in government subsidies, such as those given to people who cannot pay for basic telephone service, and a growing disagree-

ment among policymakers about which telephone, computer, and video technologies should be made available to all citizens.

Federal Agencies Challenged

The report challenges federal agencies and Congress to come up with

a national communications strategy and suggests that access to communications service could be guaranteed through caps on profits, government and industry subsidies to guarantee services to all citizens, and industry regulation.

HI-

TECH News

University of Missouri-Columbia's Extension Information office has launched an agricultural electronic bulletin board,

AgEBB, that offers timely information to farmers for the price of a telephone call. The system links farmers, university Extension specialists, and univer-

sity faculty to disseminate information, distribute and receive agriculturally related public domain software, provide a medium for idea, infor-

mation, and message exchange, and receive business data from farmers.

For a brochure, or to talk to someone about this service, call **314-882-4827**.

N EWSFAX

The facsimile (FAX) machine presents daily newspapers with the means for innovation. The one-page FAX edition, a summary of the next day's news, is relatively cheap to produce. Delivery time, content choices, and reader cost are hitches, however.

Hartford Takes the Lead

A year or two ago, *The Hartford Courant's* staff

members said to themselves, "Here we are, sitting on a vast amount of information and living in a technological revolution. What can we be doing that we're not?" One thing led to another, and last April, the Connecticut paper started publishing a special edition, called *Fax-Paper*, that it delivers to subscribers by facsimile machine.

The logic was simple—to get out a summary of

the next day's news for business people the day before it would appear in the regular newspaper. The fax'ed paper, the first of its kind in the Nation, now reaches a variety of businesses from law firms to pharmacies.

Others Join the Trend

The Knoxville (TN) *News-Sentinel* did a 4-week experiment last

fall, and plans to start a regular FAX edition in April. The *Journal of Commerce* began its *Maritime & Trade Datafax* in November, and *The New York Times* initiated its *Times-Fax* in January; the *Los Angeles Times* and the *Wall Street Journal* are planning to start editions in the near future.

F lorida CES Announces Leadership Development Seminar

The 1990 Extension Leadership Development Seminar titled *People, Problems, and Solutions: The Leadership Connection* will be held August 18-19, in Milwaukee, WI. This is a professional development opportunity that will feature poster sessions, curriculum resource displays, and paper presentations by leadership development practitioners, researchers, and trainers.

According to Elizabeth Bolton, associate professor of leadership development and adult education, Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences, University of Florida, Gainesville, proposals and attendees may come from varying disciplines. Contributions are welcome, for example, from those in agriculture, education, home economics, sociology, 4-H, community development, program develop-

ment/evaluation, or other related fields.

Communications are Vital

Although the announcement we received did not mention communications specifically, we know that communication is vital to leadership development. Therefore, we encourage you to think about submitting a paper to this effect for considera-

tion as part of this seminar. Papers connecting communications skills with leadership skills might just be innovative enough to get their attention!

To get additional information, contact Elizabeth Bolton, Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences, Room 3041 McCarty Hall, Gainesville, FL 32611-0130. Telephone: 904-392-1987.

W rite to Read

The University of Illinois Graduate School of Library and Information Service offers a quarterly thematic journal, *Library Trends*, focusing on current trends in all areas of library practice. Each issue addresses a single theme in depth, exploring topics of interest primarily to practicing librarians and information scientists and secondarily to educators and students.

The fall 1989 issue is titled, "Problem Solving in Libraries: issue editor, Ronald R. Powell.

Subscription rate for the four yearly issues is \$50; individual issues are \$15 for issues from the current volume year and \$10 for back issues from 1978. Address orders to: University of Illinois Press, Journals Department, 54 E. Gregory Drive, Champaign, IL 61820.

Can't Do It All—Polishing the Tarnished Image

The National Association of Government Communicators in an editorial in its February issue of *NAGC Communicator*, notes the governmentwide effort to polish the tarished image of its unjustly derogated public servants. Negative public perceptions are driving highly qualified, experienced people out of government and discouraging the most qualified from joining it.

Organized Campaign Created

To combat this distorted view of the "typical government worker," the Office of Personnel Management (OPM), as a first short-term objective, launched a

campaign designed to help change public opinion.

An OPM task force is planning a "Public Service Celebration," including job fairs, recognizing jobs well done, and training employees to better deal with the public.

Public Service Takes In Many

There are an estimated 13 million public service employees serving American citizens across the Nation and others around the globe. These are people who, with few exceptions, are dedicated, hardworking, and just as frustrated with layers of bureaucracy as the people they try to serve.

What is needed is a long-range plan, and

communications organizations can help design and implement such a plan. NAGC wants to start the ball rolling at the NAGC 1990 Annual Conference. Government Communicators at all levels need to take a long, hard look at some of the things that cause us to look like "typical bureaucrats" in the minds of the public.

Identify and Open Bureaucratic Bottlenecks

Some questions we can ask ourselves and our colleagues are: How do you change public perceptions? How do you improve morale? How do government agencies, often bickering among themselves and competing for limited

funding dollars, learn to cooperate and trust each other? How do public service employees survive the publics' tongue lashings and deal with their shrill complaints?

What Can We Do?

According to the *NAGC Communicator*, there are steps individuals can take to help improve our total public image.

- We need to look out for each other.
- We need to cooperate with each other.
- We need to trust each other and work together to create the kind of spirit and image we want.

Sources

Insight, "Government Briefing" section, February 26, 1990.
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